



## Stories in Stone: Samuel “Sam” Owens English, Jr., Kentucky’s “Mr. Tennis” 1933-2002

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“Follow your passion, and success will follow” is a sentiment expressed by many; however, the outcome is realized by very few. One of the exceptions to this rule was Samuel “Sam” Owens



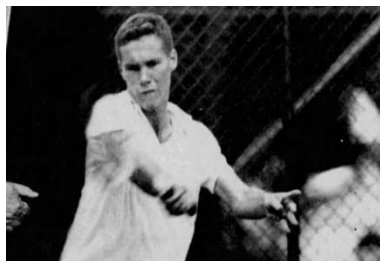
Sam O. English, Jr.

English, Jr., internationally recognized as Kentucky’s “Mr. Tennis” and credited with putting Louisville on the map of world tennis in the 1970’s and ‘80’s. His athletic talent as a player may have sparked his passion in tennis, but his extraordinary sportsmanship and ability to bring people together for a common purpose drove his success.

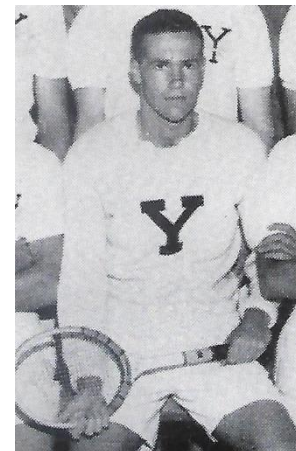
Sam English’s interest in tennis was sparked at age 11 when his parents sent him to a summer camp in Tuxedo, NC. Like most Kentucky boys, he really wanted to play basketball. However, his parents recognized the value of lifelong sports like tennis and golf. This introduction created a passion that impacted his whole life. He played tennis all over the city, on both public park and private club courts. He captained his high school tennis team at Male High School, and went on to serve as captain of the Yale University team in 1955, when they won the Eastern Intercollegiate Tennis Association Championship. In 1954, he was awarded the Yale Sportsmanship award for his exemplary conduct as a player.

Over a 30-year span he won over 100 singles and doubles titles, as well as four Kentucky men’s single titles and four doubles championships. While in high school as an unranked player, he defeated the national junior circuit player, Inman Fox, who was ranked No. 2 in Southern and No. 10 in national junior players, and later considered one of the top 10 collegiate athletes in the country.

Opportunities for English to play tennis professionally were limited following his graduation from Yale in 1955. Prior to 1968, tennis was considered an amateur sport, with limited opportunities to compete as professional player. The start of the Tennis Open era led to the development of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) and



Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) global and weekly rankings in 1973. Tennis was an Olympic sport from 1896 until 1924; it returned to the official Olympic program in 1988.



Captain of Yale tennis team, 1955.

Following English’s graduation from Yale, he completed two years of military service as a field artillery officer. He returned to Louisville where he worked first for Cochran Foil Company, and later in administration for the Standard Gravure publishing company, and then The Courier-Journal.<sup>2</sup> He began his involvement

with Louisville tennis by volunteering with the Kentucky Tennis Patrons Foundation as a facilitator for instructors and creating opportunities for expanding year-long play. The Kentucky Tennis Patrons Foundation, founded in 1952, oversaw the Louisville Parks Department's tennis instruction programs. Approximately 40,000 Jefferson County youth participated in the park's tennis program between 1957 -1980, developing both confidence from playing a sport and a lifelong enjoyment of the game.

In 1961, English became the director of Kentucky state tennis tournaments, agreeing to only take the position if African American players were allowed to compete in tournaments which were previously only open to white competitors.<sup>1</sup> In 1967, he founded the USTA Boys 18 Super National Clay Court Championships, and served as Tournament chairman from 1967 until his death in 2002. During his tenure, he brought over 70 tennis tournaments and events to Kentucky.



Sam English with the Kentucky Tennis Patrons Foundation

Beginning in 1937, indoor tennis was played at the Louisville Armory (when not in use for the Roller Derby, basketball games, or political rallies). A second indoor facility opened at the Louisville Fairgrounds when Californian Walter Senior, arrived in Louisville in 1940 as Louisville's first tennis pro. In 1967, a private tennis group headed by Sam English expanded public year-round access to tennis with the erection of an innovative air-supported "bubble" over two outdoor courts at Plantation Swim Club; the "Bubble" was the first in the state of Kentucky, and among the first installations in the United States. By 1974, a total of 42 permanent indoor courts available at five locations in Louisville, making year-round tennis on lighted and heated courts accessible to the public for a modest hourly court fee. League tennis then expanded as a year-round option for Jefferson County players.

From 1970-1980, English developed and managed The Louisville International Professional Tennis Classic and the Virginia Slims of Louisville. The tournaments attracted legendary international tennis players such as Billie Jean King, Rosemary Casals, Françoise Dürr, Ilie Năstase, Arthur Ashe, Guillermo Vilas, Jimmy Connors, Tom Okker, Rod Laver, John Newcombe, Stan Smith, and others, to Louisville. The tournaments moved to other locations in the United States when corporate sponsorship in Louisville fell short the necessary funding to attract top international tennis. The introduction of professional tournaments was instrumental in the development of the Louisville Tennis Center on Trevilian Way, which is part of the parks department facilities.

Sam English contributed to the quality of life in Louisville for an untold amount of youth, many who became life-long players or attended college on tennis scholarships. He had an economic impact in Louisville due to tennis tourism, and exposed Kentuckians first-hand to professional international tennis. His legacy of establishing tennis as an open and accessible sport regardless of race or socioeconomic status is still felt today, with year-round league play occurring across Jefferson County. Integration of competitive tournaments opened up social networking opportunities that crossed a color line and opened up the American tennis community.

Sam English was inducted in the Kentucky Tennis Hall of Fame in 1985, the Kentucky Athletic Hall of Fame in 1993, and in the USTA Southern Section's Hall of Fame in 2002. He undertook the

daunting task of researching and writing *Louisville and Kentucky Tennis History* for USTA Kentucky. For many years, the USTA Boys' 18 Clay Court Tennis Championship tournament bestowed The Sam O. English, Jr. Boys' 18 Sportsmanship Award on the athlete who embodies the same spirit of excellence that English embodied.

He is interred in Cave Hill Cemetery with five generations of the Samuel English family, in Section 12 Lot 117 NE-1/2.

*A special thanks to John English, Sr. for his invaluable contribution to this article.*

<sup>1</sup>Notable Kentucky African Americans Database, "Sam English",  
<https://ukscrc001.net/nkaa/items/show/1250>

<sup>2</sup>Koerner, Dave, "English Truly Mr. Tennis," *The Courier-Journal*, January 18, 2002, Section C, pages 1-2.

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